

# RECOGNIZING NARCISSISTIC TENDENCIES

Narcissism is a personality disorder whereby a person has an inflated sense of self-importance.

by Devora Krasnianski, founder of Adai Ad Institute

*I recently met with Dr. Elinor Greenberg, author of *Borderline, Narcissistic, and Schizoid Adaptations: The Pursuit of Love, Admiration, and Safety* and several articles about narcissism and other personality disorders. Dr. Greenberg has done extensive research and study about these behaviors and the impact on the people around them. Our conversation was specific to narcissism as it relates to marriage.*



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they may have a pattern of behaviors that fall under a specific diagnosis.

**What is it like to be married to a narcissist?**

an intense roller coaster!

**A narcissist spends an inordinate amount of time and energy trying to impress others.**

**They often act as if everyone is there either to admire or shame them.**

**DK:** In very short, what is narcissism?

**EG:** In way too short, narcissism is a set of coping mechanisms and strategies to deal with unstable self-esteem and low capacity for empathy that results from unmet interpersonal needs in childhood.

**DK:** So what might that look like in a marriage? What might it be like to be married to a narcissist?

**EG:** First, I want to clarify. Nobody is a narcissist. Labels, however well intended, cannot do justice to human complexity. Someone may have a pattern of behaviors that fall under the specific diagnosis. (However for the rest of our discussion, we will call these people 'narcissists' to avoid the lengthy explanation like the one I just described.)

To answer the question about what it might be like to be married to a narcissist. Wow! It's an intense roller coaster. First a quick description of the gestalt of narcissistic people.

Highly narcissistic people are unable to regulate their self-esteem by themselves. They need the validation of others in order not to fall into self-hating depressions characterized by abject shame over what they see as their irreparable defects. This leads them to spend an inordinate amount of time and energy trying to impress others. This persistent internal preoccupation with status and validation, coupled with their inability to reassure themselves of their own self-worth without constant admiration of others leads them to be acutely sensitive to anything that impacts their self-esteem.

In particular, this means that they are highly sensitive to interpersonal situations that have to do with status, admiration and acknowledgment; or conversely, those that relate to criticism, humiliation and shame.

Thus, they often act as if everyone they meet is there either to admire or shame them. As if these were the only possible and appropriate responses the other person could make. You are either their admiring audience or their critical audience.

They react negatively when they feel that the other has shamed them in some way.

Their responses can be way out of proportion to what others might overlook.

You may lose value in their eyes.

it can be very unpleasant. even if you learn skills to deal with the narcissism.

The pattern goes on and on.

Can a narcissist heal? They have to want to. Most don't.

you can recognize narcissistic tendencies ...

if you know what to look out for.

They react negatively when they feel that the other person has shamed them. Key word is 'feel' – when they *feel* shamed. **How they respond depends on their temperament**; those with 'avoidant' temperaments might use the silent treatment or take things away and those who are more 'confrontational' might verbally devalue the other person, or even worse physically lash out or break things. One man who was angry at his wife, threw a cup against the wall so that it smashed into pieces next to her head.

Their responses can be way out of proportion to what others might overlook as minor slights. The spouse and family are likely to be constantly **walking on eggshells when around them**, never knowing what might trigger their rage and how it will manifest this time. Hence, they are constantly stressed.

There **might also be a growing lack of interest in you**. In a healthy marriage, with the passing of time, both spouses begin to see the 'every day you'. And the initial fiery love is replaced with a certain comfort of knowing that you can be the 'every day you' and still be loved. In a marriage with narcissist, when they see the 'every day you' and your humanness, you lose value and they easily get enraged that you aren't what they dreamed of – the charm on their arm, the trophy wife.

DK: That sounds like an awful way to live. Is it possible for the spouse to learn how to deal with this?

EG: Well yes, but it will probably be an unpleasant way to live. For this conversation, let's say A is the spouse and N is the narcissist. A **will need to work with a therapist to gain specific skills to learn to tolerate N's behaviors and outbursts; and even then it will not work all the time**. A cannot get upset with anything N does; N cannot handle criticism and does not apologize. A should not expect much in the way of validation or appreciation. As Narcissists are inherently unstable, N might even praise A one moment, and then in the next moment disparage her, without noticing anything strange about this inconsistent behavior. And if A tries to point out the unfairness of this or the inconsistency, N will feel criticized and retaliate by attacking her. Now the couple is in another pointless fight and the whole family is upset. And this pattern will go on and on, over and over again. In short, it will not be an easy life.

DK: Similarly, is it possible for a narcissist to heal?

EG: Yes, it definitely is possible. But they have to want to. And be willing to put in the work that it will take. Unfortunately, too many don't see themselves as needing help. To protect their shaky self-esteem, they always blame the other person. It is the other people who needs help and needs to change, not the narcissist. But, yes, they can heal and the marriage can be salvaged. If the narcissist really really wants to.

DK: Ideally, one wouldn't get into such a marriage in the first place. Orthodox Jewish dating is generally short, from a few weeks to a few months. Can one really recognize a narcissist in such a short time?

EG: When you know what to look out for, you can see patterns of narcissistic tendencies.

DK: Of course, **noticing is just one part. Being ready to act on your gut is crucial, be ready to end the relationship**. Can you describe what you might notice?

EG: Firstly, note that one or two isolated incidents is not necessarily indicative of a problem. When you start to notice a pattern, you might be looking at a narcissist.

On your point of trusting your gut: If something feels 'off' during the date, or if you feel 'off' after the date, trust your intuition. Ask for more time to process it all. Don't let anyone talk you out of what your gut is telling you. No matter how well-intentioned someone else might be, you know yourself best.

Also, with everything I will share below, it is important to pay attention to the look on their face, the tone of their voice and other non-verbal cues.

## Narcissists tend to

Need to feel superior, with not that much to back it up. 'Braggart, with a lot to be modest about.'

See the world as hierarchal; things or people are either above them or below them.

See everything in extremes, as totally wonderful or horribly terrible. They can't relate to the concept of 'good enough'. They don't see 'gray areas'.

Feel that their way is the only right way. They do not recognize that others can have a different opinion and still be valid.

Be overly concerned with status.

Lack empathy. 'Caring about others isn't important'. 'Others exist only for me'. People are interchangeable.

Are concerned about never feeling shamed.

Think only about themselves. They don't realize that there are 2 people in the conversation.

## And therefore they might

- Brag about their accomplishments, cars, important friends (or other status symbols) so that you'll know how successful they are.
- Talk negatively about previous dates.
- Act with grandiosity (which can be misconstrued as confidence.)

- Express contempt of other people or things. They will devalue people to put them below them. They might use derogatory names or descriptions. Or roll their eyes, or use some other facial expression to let you know how they feel.
- They idealize and try to befriend those people who they feel are self-esteem or status enhancers.

Use language of extremes

- Everything about them is unique, special, perfect (ex: s/he goes to best doctors, lives in the best neighborhood)
- Devalue anyone or anything. Other people are defective, garbage and worthless.
- Things 'always' happen to them, or 'never' happen for them.
- They either 'love' something or 'hate' something.

Compare in extremes

- Better than/ worse than (ex: "This restaurant is so much better than the one yesterday")

Try to persuade or convince you to bring you to understand the issue as they see it.

- Even on the smallest things that aren't really important or relevant to life together. ("You have to agree this show is great.")
- Insults others with intent to make you despise that person too.

Get insulted if didn't take their advice.

- Get incensed about something that they feel slights them in any way (even something very, very small), and they can't get off the topic. (ex: "That guy brought me hot coffee, I specifically asked him for iced. ... I need to talk to the manger to get him fired... blah, blah")
- Try to show superior status over anyone in service position (ex: Bus boy, waiter, parking attendant, doorman)

- Not ask about your or your day. They really don't care.

- Not to apologize for anything, as that will puncture their defense grandiosity and expose them as flawed. In a narcissist's mind, to be flawed is the same as being worthless. If they admit that they were wrong, they are likely to drop into a shame-based self-hating depression in which they hate themselves. To avoid this, they avoid admitting that they ever do anything wrong. It is all someone else's fault.

- Cares more about what the neighbors might think than for you. (ex: "Stop doing that; everyone will think that we are uncultured.")

- Move the conversation back to themselves. "Oh that reminds me of a story about myself ..."

- Talk only about topics that they are interested in.

- Provide a running commentary of what happened that day, with no regard if it is interesting to you.

Bring up a topic where your opinion differs from theirs.

EG: A typical response in a conversation might be a story about themselves, criticism, bragging, putdowns, complaining or lectures. They might even repeat the same stories over and over.

DK: Most of the above will be revealed in the regular 'dating' conversations. "How was your day?" "Tell me about your friends." "Who are people you look up to?" Are there any other suggestions of scenarios to kind of 'create'?

EG: You can bring up a topic and your opinion that you know will differ from theirs. See how they respond. Do they try to convince you to see it their way? Do they not 'understand' how you could see it in your way? Do they get all upset that you voiced a perspective different from theirs?

DK: Any specific questions that can be asked that their answers can be telling of certain maladaptive tendencies?

Ask tough questions.

EG: A great question to understand about how they grew up is: "When someone spilled milk on the table, what happened next?"

DK: I'm guessing that a similar question like "What is a good response when kids scribble on the wall right before the guests arrive?" can also be telling of how they operate.

Look at body language.

EG: Yes. There are no right responses to these types of questions. But do note that some people will try to answer 'correctly' so as not to feel ashamed. So looking out for body language and other non-verbal cues are important.

DK: So if I probe further into their account of the story, I might touch on a detail that might trigger a response that can help me know more about their personality. What are your thoughts about doing that?

EG: That can work.

DK: Are there any other discussion starters or questions that can help discern one's perception of the world?

Listen well.

EG: Another great question is: "What is your vision of a happy marriage? What is the role of the wife in that marriage? The husband?" "If a wife and husband disagree, how do you think that they should settle it?" And here's another question you might ask: "Some people believe that they are born to be 'boss', others believe that they are born to be 'equals'. Where do you stand on this idea?" Listen well. How they answer is just as important as what they say.

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DK: Is there anything that I didn't ask that is important to this discussion?

Narcissism isn't something that goes away with time, maturity or even being in a loving marriage.

EG: Narcissism isn't something that goes away with time, maturity or even being in a loving marriage. A narcissist has their own distorted view of what love is and really no one can be that for them. If you see signs of narcissistic behaviors, do not think that your love for them can fix it; it won't.

DK: Thank you for sharing all this. I am sure that this information will be helpful. And even if we save one person from a life of misery, we have saved a world.

EG: Thank you for the opportunity to share my life's work with your community. Much hatzlacha in all that you do.

If you are noticing these things during the dating, note that it will not get better later in the marriage.

Speak to a **qualified professional** about your apprehensions.